

## How University Academics Think

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Michele Lamont wrote a book in 2009 entitled *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* (Harvard University Press). I didn't find the book all that useful--its focus on the peer review process kept it too circumscribed for my interests, plus I found Lamont's observations pedestrian--but the concept of the book, an exploration of what makes today's university academics tick, prompted me to try to make sense of some of the patterns of thought and behavior I live with every day (I'm a university professor). This writing describes some of what has come out of that endeavor.

To organize and ground my presentation, I've tied it to a case study of the current--March, 2010--effort at my university to develop a university-wide program of undergraduate general education (I'll define terms, including general education, later). In particular, I will refer to the web site of a group of university faculty and administrators charged by upper level administration with preparing a report on general education that includes a recommended general education program. My goal here is to make observations that apply to universities generally, or at least a significant element within them, and I'm using my immediate experience to get at that. So even as I reference my discussion in the particulars in my situation, I'll stay as distant from it as I can and still get my points across. I won't use the names of individuals or, though they would be easy enough to obtain, provide a link to the web site or even mention the name of my university.

A university is far too complex a place for observations and generalizations such as the ones I make here to apply across the board, to all of faculty and administrators. To the extent that what I offer touches down on reality, most likely it is in reference to what is going on in the social sciences, humanities, education, and programs in social work, higher education, and student services, and to individuals active in efforts to move the university in the direction of bringing about social reform or transformation. And even in that group, there are many exceptions to any pattern of outlook and approach that I might cite. Thus, as I note this or that

tendency, I am not saying that everybody is this way. And even if I am on to something, it doesn't mean that I'm right on; and no matter how on to something I am, reality will always be more complex and contingent than any word depictions I provide. Keep all of this in mind as you take in the material below.

Historically, university education has centered on the study of the academic disciplines--literature, foreign language, philosophy, history, mathematics, and the various fields in the natural and social sciences. General education has characteristically referred to the investigations, or courses, in those fields during the undergraduate years considered to be the most essential and therefore required of all students whatever their particular interests and programs of study. These requirements are the common, or general, component of the undergraduate experience, in contrast to the particular components: the major, the minor, and the elective courses.

My university does not have a university-wide general education program. Various colleges within the university have requirements for all students enrolled in their college that amount to general education in that particular unit, although they may call it something else, say, a distribution requirement. Until it was dropped this past year, for decades the only university-wide requirement in my university was a two-credit physical activity requirement. In 2006, a six-credit diversity requirement was instituted. This past year an outside accreditation team cited the need for a university-wide general education program.

From the web site of the Work Group: "In September, 2009, Provost [last name] charged a work group to develop a plan for General Education to help ensure that the University achieves its undergraduate educational mission by providing all students with foundations of literacy, communication skills, critical thinking, humanistic and scientific inquiry, global citizenship and the appreciation of other cultures."

The Work Group was to submit a report of its recommendations on December 19th, 2009. Essentially, it had a semester to complete its work. It set up a web site, which at this writing provides a detailed

description the Work Group's efforts, including its recommended general education program.

I'll begin this analysis by considering the last two of the Provost's general education goals, global citizenship and appreciation of other cultures. To understand what those two goals are about in this context, and everything else I deal with in this writing, I need to do what Lamont was doing in her book, look at how academics think, or, in anthropological or sociological terms, at their fundamental values (preferences, commitments, concepts of right and wrong, propriety), along with patterns of behavior that flow from that. I'll do that sporadically throughout this writing.

When most people think of a university, the image of a marketplace of ideas comes to mind: that is to say, a setting where a wide range of differing, and competing, perspectives and approaches are generated, welcomed, and discussed and debated. Not that the university-as-a-marketplace-of-ideas value is completely absent in today's university culture--I don't want to paint a starker, either-or picture than reality warrants--but in our time, and increasingly, this ideal isn't as salient, prominent, cherished, as another value: *the university as a repository of right, just, appropriate, correct ideas*. (Global education and appreciation of other cultures are prominent right ideas.) Important to note, there is a distinct ideological/political dimension to what is considered a right idea. Know what the left thinks and wants and you'll be able to predict with a high degree of accuracy what university academics think and want; in the main anyway, and particularly in areas other than science, mathematics, business, and technology.

Another value, or perhaps it is better viewed as a shared characteristic, is that there is *dead certainty about the right ideas*. They are right, period; no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Anybody who doesn't agree that they are right, just, correct, is misguided, unenlightened, behind the times, and malevolent if not outright evil.

Another characteristic related to this, *the propensity to dichotomize*. Things are this way or that way, not some of this and some of that, or this over here and that over there contingent on

this and that, or an integration of this and that. Whatever it is is set off against anything it isn't. So if, this example, global education is right, and it is, there is no need to get into whether there is a downside to global citizenship, or whether local or national loyalties might be right for some people, any of those kinds of qualifications.

*There is no pressing need for rigorous scrutiny of what is right.* If something is right, and you know it is right, why do that? It just takes time away from, another value, *the mission of implementing right ideas.* Get about the business of making the world a better place, and not just the university, the society and culture as a whole. A big part of this, another value, *teach students the right ideas, and get them to implement them in their own lives and in the world generally.* Bring students into the vanguard of the enlightened. The university would be remiss not to do that. And along with that, another value, or way, *discourage, marginalize, silence, demonize, and exclude wrong ideas.* Why allow voice to people--students, faculty, speakers, anybody--that are spewing wrong ideas? What good does that serve? It entices people to think and do the wrong things. It stands in the way of progress. Why endure that for a second?

In the Work Group's web site, global citizenship and appreciation of other cultures were not critiqued as goals but rather accepted as givens. Someone unfamiliar with the prevailing thoughtworld in the contemporary university might ask: What about local, state, and national loyalties? What about appreciation of one's own culture as well as other cultures? Is it really the university's business to be telling students what to think in these areas rather than allowing them to study them from all sides and make up their own minds? All I can say is that those kinds of questions are not part of the discourse in the university these years; they don't come up. If people somehow do think about bringing them up, they know it is going to be uphill to get their questions into the public forum, and they know that if they come on too strong doing that kind of thing, get too visible with it, they could be eating lunch alone and, even bigger stakes, be looking for a new job after the tenure turndown.

Yesterday, a flyer for an upcoming Identity and Intercultural Awareness symposium appeared on university bulletin boards and

in faculty email boxes. The speakers at the symposium will be Narhanum Temirova, a Meskhetiyen Turk; Cadoux Dzingou, Congo; Riziki Kassim, Somalia; Shekhar Timsina, Bhutan; Nir Gurung, Bhutan-Nepal; Mamie Biossa, Congo; Jeetan Khadka, Nepal; and Abdikadir Ibrahim, Somali. Following the symposium will be West African music and dance by Africa Diamono. This sounds like a good program. The point in this context, however, is I can't recall a comparable program around here, ever, in European identity and awareness. Identity and intercultural awareness doesn't include European identity and intercultural awareness of European culture(s). As far as I can tell, something like that isn't thought of as needed, or even considered as a possibility. If somehow its possibility did come up it would be dismissed as contrary to appreciating other cultures, which is what we should be doing with students, and more, counterproductive (supportive of European, white, insularity, feelings of superiority, and even xenophobia--in short, racist). If thoughts come into any faculty members' heads such as why there can be a Black Student Union on campus but not a White Student Union, unless they are tenured and fully promoted and tough as leather, and perhaps even a tad masochistic, they had best keep that thought to themselves.

To go on, note that the other four goals in the Provost's list are skills or capabilities: literacy, communication skills, critical thinking, and humanistic and scientific inquiry. What might that be about? Literacy? A central goal for a university? Communication skills? Does this get the university into teaching proper interpersonal relationships? Critical thinking? What's that? Why humanistic and scientific inquiry and not social science and mathematical inquiry? Why these skill goals and not others? Neither the Provost nor the Work Group, which reiterated these goals time and again in the web site, felt the need to go beyond a list--no explanation, no elaboration, no justification. So I'm left to surmise, which is what I will do.

I suspect that the Provost and the Work Group felt no need to do more than simply list the skills. These skills are right ideas, so why dig into them?

To go beyond that observation, I'll set out more thought patterns, values, in the university culture:

*Egalitarianism.* When some people think about individuals and groups, they assume basically equality--in capability, merit, and accomplishment--that's the inherent nature of human beings in their minds. When equality doesn't exist in fact, these people conclude it is a sign that somebody is rigging the system in their favor, keeping groups of people down, exploiting them, oppressing them--or anyway that something is off--and that that circumstance needs to be rectified. Call these people egalitarians.

When other people--non-egalitarians--think about people and groups they assume qualitative difference, not equality. If non-egalitarians see individual and group inequality in fact, while they hold out the possibility that it might be because somebody is shortchanging somebody, standing on their neck, whatever the best metaphor, it might well be that this state of affairs reflects individual differentiation in capability, interest, commitment, and motivation, and cultural factors that either promote or retard achievement or whatever else you are measuring.

All to say, you can expect egalitarians to focus on group inequity and bringing about group equality through social and political action, and for non-egalitarians to focus on individual exceptionalism and the personal qualities and cultural and social circumstance, especially political freedom, necessary to manifest it.

The thoughtworld of the university is dominated by egalitarianism. The preponderance of academics think everybody's equally fine, and that the problem is that the political, economic, and social circumstances, historically and now, haven't allowed/don't allow everybody's equal fineness to come to the fore. The job of the university community, who are clued in to what has been going on, is to use the university as a base for creating the egalitarian ideal: equity and harmony among all people and cultures. A big part of that is teaching whites, especially the men among them, how bad they've been, and are, and minorities how good they've been, and are, and bringing the bottom to the top where they ought to be: that is to say, non-Europeans, non-whites, woman, homosexuals, and poor people. Stamp out white entitlement and privilege. De-Christianize America and Europe (despite its nominal universalism,

Christianity has a bad track record, including anti-Semitism, exploitation of native peoples, and homophobia). Move toward collectivization politically, including democratization, which gives virtually unlimited power to the collective (in contrast to the individual) in any and all areas of life and, especially, to the government that both shapes and implements the group will. A term used to describe the egalitarian ideal is "social justice."

Those who advocate a skill-focused general education program aren't doing it so much because they are deeply committed to honing skills among students. The emphasis on skill development stems much less from what it points *toward* than from what it points *away from*. Talking about skills is a way to avoid getting into non-egalitarian ideals, patterns, and realities that, in the past, too often resulted from goals generated within the context of liberal education. Such as the frontiers of scholarship, intellectual rigor, and academic excellence. Or the academic disciplines, their domains of concern, prominent personages, central concepts and theories, epistemologies (ways of knowing), and modes of expression. Or the knowledge associated with the educated person. Or reference to the Western Heritage. Or academic freedom and integrity--if we are going to create a better world we can't allow people the license to think the wrong ways and profess and do the wrong things and in the process retard progress. Get into any of that too much and the false notion of inherent human differences, including in accomplishment, particularly as manifested in the West in contrast to other peoples, runs the risk of being perpetuated. Liberal studies, including philosophy, can lead too many students to raise counterproductive questions around fairness and justice and freedom and liberty and who has the right to manage other people's lives to realize their particular conception of life as it ought to be lived. Get students studying the Western Heritage too much and you run the danger of white students especially concluding, "Oh, that's who my people are, that's who I am. While the story of my ancestors is not without its dirty linen (nor is anyone else's), on the whole I'm very proud of it and feel connected it. I'm dedicated to continuing the best aspects of my racial and cultural heritage as other peoples races and ethnicities do and are encouraged to do; self-preservation and self-determination is the right of all people, including mine." We can't have that.

Framing goals in terms of competences rather than academic subjects or intellectual development creates the context for bringing the focus where it ought to be: on the students themselves and how they think and act now and will act in the future. It shifts the university's mandate from concerning itself with just what students think and do in scholarly fields to what they think and do in other, more important, areas: with regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, service to others, the environment, political and economic redistribution of power and wealth, the realization of human equality, and personal relationships with other ethnicities, cultures, and races. Reshaping beliefs, attitudes, and behavior in those areas are at the core of a university education, and since by definition general education is the core, shared, element in the university curriculum, general education goals should be framed in a way that doesn't interfere with the university serving its calling in those areas.

Consider this statement describing Harvard's new Program in General education from its web site:

Harvard has long required that students take a set of courses outside their concentration in order to ensure that their undergraduate education encompasses a broad range of topics and approaches. The new Program in General Education seeks to connect in an explicit way what students learn in Harvard classrooms to life outside the ivied walls and beyond the college years. The material taught in general education courses is continuous with the material taught in the rest of the curriculum, but the approach is different. These courses aim not to draw students into a discipline, but to bring the discipline into students' lives. The Program of General Education introduces students to subjects and skills from across the University, and does so in ways that link the arts and sciences with the 21st century world students will face and the lives they will lead after college.

Note the focus on contemporary and future realities, and on students and how they live their lives. Note the reference to skills, and the absence of any reference to scholarship, intellectual rigor, exemplary academic achievement, and academic freedom or personal integrity. Note the tacit agenda around social reform or



reconstruction. My bet is the to-do list around race, gender, homophobia, the environment, diversity, economic redistribution, and the rest, get major play in this program.

Compare this Harvard general education program to the decades-old distribution requirement (which amounts to a general education program) for all students in the college of arts and sciences at my university. Students are required to select courses from a list of possibilities in foreign language, mathematical sciences, fine arts, literature, humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. The focus is on the academic disciplines and not on students' lives and contemporary and future realities. It is on creating an educated person and training the mind. It respects students' freedom of conscience and association, and it considers the way students live their lives now and in the future to be up to them and not the university. Very different from this Harvard program developed recently. I believe the best approach for my university would be essentially to adopt the arts college distribution requirement as the general education program for the university as a whole. It is elegantly simple, taking up a half page of copy, it's easy to understand and implement, it's scholarly, it isn't about mind management, and it doesn't tell faculty how they must teach their courses (as the Work Group's proposal does--more on that later).

The Work Group methodology is typical of the way things are decided in the university currently, and revealing of prevalent thought patterns. An issue is identified and a committee--whatever it is called, a work group in this case--is formed to deal with it. A call goes out for volunteers to be on the committee. The committee meets regularly, during which time members contribute ideas. Matters are decided by majority vote, although votes are almost always unanimous--there is very little, if any, disagreement or contention in the committee. The committee issues a report, and all members stand behind it. One wouldn't expect minority positions to accompany the final report.

To get at what that's all about, more thought patterns, values, ways, in today's university.

*Collectivism.* The group (rather than the individual) as the primary focus of identity and action. The group as the salient element in the context. Participate in the group, support the group, defer to the group will. Cooperate, collaborate, serve the joint enterprise. Don't criticize the group or its decisions. Be a good team player. Individualism is egotistical, selfish, it leads to elitism. Trying to stand out, go your own way, results in excessiveness, discord. We are all equal here, you are no better than anyone else, don't try to make it seem any other way. Get along, go along. The better world we are trying to create is going to come about through a collectivist mentality, a public mentality, not through individualism, privatism, going your own way, or trying to impose your personal views on others.

*No heavy intellectual lifting required.* On things that really matter, the right answers are clear to any enlightened person, as we all are in the university. There is no need to stay up nights studying an issue, stewing over nuance and alternatives, slaving over position papers, anything like that. That just slows things down, sets up hierarchies, and makes people uncomfortable, and we value people being comfortable. In fact, doing that kind of thing rings of showiness and excessiveness and undue self-importance, and we don't want that here. Present yourself that way and you'll get ignored by the rest of us, and if you do too much of that we'll relegate you to pariah status.

*"Good-soldierism."* Do what you are assigned to do. Carry out your task. Don't question it, don't try to re-shape it. Be a good soldier. Good-soldierism serves as a qualification of we-are-all-equal-here egalitarianism, as it stresses deference to central authority, central planning, which, in this case, the Provost represented.

*Democracy and consensus.* On first blush, these two values appear to be ways to get everybody involved and all voices heard and taken into account, and that is the rhetoric. But impressions and talk are misleading. You have to get beyond conventional wisdom and sloganeering to how democracy and consensus actually play out in practice in the university (and elsewhere). More than anything, they are a ways to put power in the hands of the collective and silence minority views. Someone has an idea or recommendation

that doesn't square with the groups' thinking? Put it up to a quick vote, he loses, forget about it, and him, and move on. You don't have to consider the merits of what the dissenter offered, or even pay the slightest attention to it. You don't have to know the least thing about what he is talking about, or even pretend to care about it. Really, you don't have to know what you are doing. All you have to know is what side you are on--and that's easy enough, because it is in the wind, you can't miss it--and vote. You win the day, regardless of the merits of the issue. You don't have to waste time and energy on naysayers and their off-beat proposals, which would just complicate things and muddy the water and slow things down and produce discord. And you shut the guy up, and you shut him out. And what is so good about it is you feel sparkling clean about what you are doing--you are being democratic. Plus it feels good to join together with others to push the upstart(s) down the hill, and to do it without even getting your hands dirty, all it took was a vote.

As for consensus: a way to compel outliers to go along with the group. Consensus is the way we operate here, and we're all on one side and you are on the other; so get on board. Or at least keep quiet. Stop going on about honoring minority views and all those other excuses for wasting the group's time and energy. We are trying to get something done here and we are all on the same page but you. You are just getting in the way. Again, invoke the consensus norm and you win the day: you co-opt the renegade or send him out the door, plus you feel good about yourself because you are on the side of consensus, and what could possibly be wrong with that?

The Work Group saw no need to examine the qualifications of its membership with reference to its charge, or the degree to which it represents the university as a whole. We are all equal to one another in the university, so why bother?

What qualifies these people to make pronouncements about general education? What makes this group of volunteers up to doing this job? (My conclusion from reviewing their professional backgrounds: nothing in particular.) How representative of the total faculty is this group? The majority of the Work Group's faculty members are clinical faculty, not tenure-track, or permanent, faculty. Clinical faculty do not have scholarship and research responsibilities and are typically practitioners responsible for

instruction, supervision, and assessment of candidates during field experience and clinical practice, say in medicine. Senior faculty are markedly underrepresented on the Work Group: there is not a single full professor among the faculty members.

There was no consideration of what difference it might make that the Work Group was made up of just anyone who decided to sign on. College football teams, movie studios, business corporations, and just about anybody trying to get something done well go out and seek people, they recruit the best they can find. They don't assume that they will do just as well with volunteers. But in today's university, there is no problem with a group of volunteers putting together a program that will be required of every undergraduate student in the university, and, in all likelihood, for generations.

The Work Group didn't analyze the Provost's charge, didn't assess it, didn't modify it. My value, university faculty are duty-bound to be more than good soldiers carrying out orders from their superiors. The Work Group should have applied their own best thinking to whether or not the accreditation recommendation and the Provost's endorsement of it were, indeed, best for the university. The Work Group should have assessed the Provost's definition of general education: is that definition the best guide to a general education program at this university? There is no evidence that the Work Group even thought about the possibility of doing any of that. Their job was to carry out the task assigned, not reflect on its justification. I can't imagine this kind of mindless dutifulness even ten years ago.

There is no rationale statement in the web site description of the Work Group's report. A rationale would specify exactly what direction the Group is taking with this curriculum development endeavor and why. A rationale would state clearly the definition of general education the Work Group used to guide its work and, the point here, justify that definition over others that could be used. A rationale would specify the goals of general education in this proposal and, again, justify those goals. There was none of this. Instead, the Work Group simply reiterated, word for word, the terse charge that came down to them from the Provost. "Ours is not to reason why . . . "

Nothing in the Provost's actions or in the web site material indicated any consideration was given by the Provost to soliciting individual, in contrast to collective (the Work Group), visions of general education. The process of developing a general education program would be served if two or three individuals in the university community had been charged with devising models of general education, and especially if those individuals were chosen because they brought insight and wisdom to the undertaking and not just because they wanted to take on the task. Individual designs would provide alternatives to consider along with the Work Group's proposal. They would highlight whether decisions by individuals versus decision by committee makes a difference (anybody experienced with committee-think and committee-output knows it does). Similarly, five or six contrasting general education programs from other universities could be put into the mix. And programs used at this university--for example, the distribution requirement of the arts college I mentioned previously. A true choice is from viable alternatives. Yes or no to one possibility is more accurately termed a pick rather than a choice.

Instead of recognizing the need for alternatives from which to chose and recommending that they be generated, the Work Group has acted in a way that monopolizes the process of curriculum development. Rather than submitting the report in December as they were charged to do and thus ceding the stage to other people, they, their word, refused to submit a report, and, at this writing in March, have yet to do so. They are acting as if they are *the* action in general education planning: if you'd like, pitch your ideas to them and they will take them into account. Contrary to the Provost's original charge simply to submit a report, they are seeking formal approval of an element or their draft proposal by the university committee dealing with curricular matters. This violates university policy that requires units affected by a curriculum--colleges, departments, programs--and the Provost formally review and sign off on curricular proposals before they are submitted to the university committee. The attempt to impose policies and practices without the participation of those who will have to live with them would not have occurred in times past.

I am a member of the university committee referred to in this last paragraph and in a committee session made the points I outlined in the last two paragraphs. The committee found my

comments without merit to say the least. One member of the committee leaped to his feet--we were all seated--and visibly angry, shaking, speaking loudly and rapidly, strode toward me in what I experienced as a threatening manner. I remained seated. I didn't say anything. The chair of the committee did not admonish him but rather me for, she asserted, repeatedly bringing these matters up--I deny that--and told me if I did it again she "would have to ask me to leave the room." I was both shocked and shaken (the truth, I still am). Depart from the ways of today's university and be too visible and vocal about it and, especially if you appear isolated and vulnerable and unlikely or unable to hit back, the pack will attack.

People who aren't around universities assume they are characterized by every aspect of matters being investigated to the nth degree, careful, exact thinking, precise conceptualization and theorizing, and so on. Below are some illustrations from the web site of the "no heavy intellectual lifting required" value that mitigates the press to think all that deeply about much of anything these days. Quotes are from the web site followed by my commentary. And let me make clear that these quotes comprise all that the web site says about whatever it is.

"Over the past three decades a majority of universities in the U.S. have adopted general education requirements for their baccalaureate degree programs. The intent of general education requirements is to ensure that students receive foundations in literacy, communication skills, critical thinking, humanistic and scientific inquiry, global citizenship and an appreciation of different cultures."

That other universities are doing it doesn't in itself justify its implementation here. The case has to be made for a university-wide general education program at this university. Part of that is defining general education in this context and justifying that perspective; simply reiterating the Provost's definition doesn't suffice.

"Although such ideals [the Provost's list--literacy, communication skills, and the rest] are consistent with the mission and vision of [this university, and then a footnote], [this university] does not have

a general education system. Each of the Schools and Colleges has its own degree requirements, but the only University-wide requirement for undergraduates is six-credits in approved diversity courses."

The mission and vision footnoted refers to this university as a premier research university, and it refers to scholarship, and to a commitment to liberal education, and to creating, evaluating, sharing and applying knowledge. The definition of general education the Work Group has accepted from the Provost does not reflect these commitments. More, because something is consistent with a mission or vision is not enough; many things can be consistent with something. The challenge is to have the *most consistent* definition, or at least identify what the most consistent definition is and decide where to go from there (missions aren't chiseled in stone; general education program development is a good occasion for reconsidering, modifying, the university's mission). In any case, the challenge is to go beyond declaration: show, demonstrate, make the case for whatever it is, and in the process of doing that articulate what the proposed program isn't and why it isn't as well as what it is.

Actually, the university does have a general education system of sorts, even though it doesn't go by that name. Arguably, the distribution requirements in the arts college comprise a general education requirement, and the other colleges have similar requirements for their students. That is not to say that there isn't the need for a university-wide requirement, but it has to be grounded in the current reality here. Doing that would surface the fact that a university-wide general education program may strip the arts college, say, of the prerogative to define which general studies, distribution requirement, whatever label to use, configuration is best for their students, and it would encourage attention to the consequences of that possibility.

"We propose a system of Gen Ed founded on desired attributes for graduates and which incorporates national standards and best practices as well as the signature areas that make [the university's "nickname," as it were] unique."

To define general education as simply "desired attributes" reflects intellectual, conceptual, off-handedness. Desired attributes is so

vague that virtually anything can be justified with reference to it. The desired attributes construct has for all practical purposes no boundaries, provides no criteria for inclusion and exclusion. As for national standards and best practices and signature areas that make this university unique, again, it is not enough to tell, declare; show, demonstrate, explain, discuss, establish.

"The proposed system provides transferability of requirements and does not necessarily increase total degree requirements for students."

There is a sketchy, conversational, terse, approaching text-message-like quality to the draft of the report on the web site. What does "transferability of requirements" mean exactly as it applies to this proposal? Does not *necessarily* increase degree requirements? Does that mean it sometimes will, you can't predict whether it will, or depending how the proposal is implemented it might or might not? Which is it? Explain, spell things out.

"Our approach is not to create a new core curriculum, but to find ways to modify and enrich curricula to target the desired learning outcomes. . . . [T]he strategy is to have no net increase in the total number of course credits that students must earn."

Contrary to this claim, the proposal does create a new core. Its knowledge category involves a course in each of four areas; the diversity and cultural competency category includes a six-credit requirement, with a specific course that must be taken by all students; the skills area details a host of specified capabilities that are to be included in all students' programs of study, plus a writing-intensive course and a course in quantitative reasoning. That there is not an increase in the total number of credits to graduate does not establish that there isn't a new core. A new core could be courses and experiences that substitute for what is already in place, which is what the current proposal does.

The major issue is not whether the general education program will increase the total number of credits but rather whether it robs from the electives component of the undergraduate program, as it gives every appearance of doing. Undergraduate programs are made up of general education (or whatever it is called), a major



concentration, a minor concentration, and electives. Elective courses give students the opportunity to explore a variety of areas. The 18-22-year-old stage of life, the age range of most undergraduates, is a time to explore interests and possibilities as part of the process of self-definition and self-development. Squeeze elective opportunities and you detract from students' growth and maturity at this time of their lives.

In the section of the web site describing the general education curriculum, the Work Group indicates that students will receive "foundations in literacy, communication skills, critical thinking, humanistic and scientific inquiry, the processes of continuing to acquire and use knowledge, global citizenship and the appreciation of different cultures, and the signature areas that make [this university] unique." Then an outline of three categories of requirements: knowledge; diversity and cultural competency; and skills.

I have been on the faculty of this university for thirty-six years and am unclear as to what is meant by "signature areas that make [this university] unique." More than anything, this university is known for its excellent medical school and the hospital associated with the university. I don't suppose that is what the Work Group is referring to, but evidently the Work Group considered whatever they are talking about self-evident because there is no explanation of what they mean by "signature areas."

The knowledge area of the proposal involves a course in each of four areas: physical and life sciences, social sciences, humanities and fine arts, and health and environment. Why these and not, say, foreign language is not explained. Nor is how a single course could suffice in an area as broad as humanities and fine arts. Or how a health and the environment component (described tersely as "an understanding of human health and wellness, the environment and connections between the two") flows from the goals, or what justifies the university getting in the business of students' health and wellness. My best guess is that this is an example of collective decision-making. Anything that anybody puts on the butcher paper taped on the blackboard at an hour-long Tuesday afternoon meeting that has a favorable ring to it (as personal health does) gets a pass,

it's fine, and on to the next brainstormed item on the list.

The diversity and cultural competency requirement, says the web site, gives students "an understanding of the diversity of human experiences, cultures and perspectives."

Exactly how does the required course in that area, "Race and Racism in the U.S.," flow from that goal? It doesn't, and I strongly suspect that the Work Group doesn't care that it doesn't. Given what is going on now in courses with titles such as this, this will not be a scholarly study of race and racism but rather the occasion for the denigration of white people and the indoctrination of what those currently in power in the university consider proper views on race. White students will be conditioned to attend obsessively to the interests of minorities and to serve those interests and have no positive racial and cultural identity or concern for the status and future of their own people. With minorities, in contrast, racial consciousness, commitment, organization and collective action will be encouraged and supported along with an absence of any concern for the wellbeing or fate of white people. A hurtful and cruel double standard, but not in the eyes of university faculty. Knowing that I have written on race from a white perspective, a number of students have surreptitiously contacted me (they are afraid of reprisals) telling me that these kinds of courses are occasions for anti-white bigotry. The irony is that the biggest example of racism on the university campus is the diversity emphasis.

My take on it is that the race, or race and culture, courses, whatever they are called, aren't most accurately characterized as anti-white. More particularly, they are anti-*gentile* white. When racism is talked about in the university it is understood that the reference is to the deplorable thoughts and actions of white gentiles. The referent isn't Jewish racism. To illustrate, typical of the materials read in courses on racism is Stanford professor George Fredrickson's book, *Racism: A Short History*. Every example of racist conduct over the centuries depicted in the Fredrickson book was committed by white gentiles, no exceptions. And, according to Fredrickson, and according to the current thinking in universities generally, racism is a very wide-ranging failing of white gentiles. Slavery, racial segregation, the Holocaust, questions about the mutability of human beings, assertions that there are persistent

physical or cultural differences among people, white separatist impulses, animosity toward Third World immigration, disapproval by whites of other groups, social exclusion--all part of the same package, racism. Affirmation of European traditions and one's white racial identity and solidarity with other whites? Forming white organizations that parallel those formed by other groups, including on university campuses, to articulate, protect, and further their interests? White (gentile) racism, the only kind. (Although this may be changing. Not at my university as far as I can tell, but currently one hears the word racist applied to Jewish actions in Israel, and there is some discussion of Jewish animus if not racism toward gentile whites--see, for example, the writings of university professor Kevin MacDonald in his book *The Culture of Critique* and on The Occidental Observer's web site.)

Why the label "diversity" in this category? Diversity is a central construct in an ideological/political movement that has taken form over just the past several decades, since the Bakke Supreme Court case in 1978. It is not a neutral term, nor is it the only viable term (cultural pluralism is one alternative). Indeed, diversity as a construct, its genesis, its place in a movement, its implications for policy, what its proponents and critics contend about it, along with considerations of alternative perspectives from which to view racial and cultural difference, should be studied in an atmosphere of free and open dialogue and debate. That approach is consistent with the history of the American university, at least at its best. If diversity is propagandized, inculcated, preached, that is not the American university's way. That is someplace else's way. History has shown us that when there is no debate, no visible difference in perspective, no dissenting voice--and that has been the case around diversity--there is oppression. A university should be the setting for unfettered explorations of all sides of any matter of current social and cultural import, and the articulation of all points of view free from intimidation and reprisal. Might has been in the hands of the diversity advocates, but might does not make right, and it absolutely should not make right in a university.

And what exactly is meant "cultural competency"? Is it actually, as I strongly suspect, the insistence on deference to certain favored left-of-center cultural directions? In contrast to when I entered higher education over four decades ago, there is marked absence of concern for issues related to academic freedom, freedom

of conscience, and the right of the university to shape the heart, minds, and behavior of students in some favored direction.

As I would expect, the Work Group doesn't mention anything related to what I bring up here. It has no place in the prevalent thinking these days.

Now to a consideration of the skills category in the Work Group's program. It is a lengthy list broken into the areas of quantitative reasoning, communication, critical and creative thinking, scientific reasoning, information literacy, and social and interpersonal skills. Unlike the knowledge and diversity categories, with the exception of a required "writing-intensive" course and a course in quantitative reasoning, these skills are to be integrated into the courses students take over the four years of their undergraduate program--in the major and minor sequences and electives. Instructors of these courses must make room in their courses for these skills and teach them, and report to a central body that they are doing so. They don't, however, have to report what aspects of their courses they deleted in order to accomplish this order, or whether they consider teaching these skills justified or themselves qualified to instruct in these areas.

Before I get to an analysis of the skill category, this discussion to provide a backdrop for my comments:

The academic disciplines--mathematics, the various fields in science, history, literature, and the rest--are more than domains of concern and issues and understandings and contentions with reference to them, and personages and organizations. They are also ways of thinking and perceiving with regard to what they care about; ways of coming to know and assigning meaning in their area of the world. As well, integral to each area of scholarship are particular ways of expressing and communicating what has been found to be true and preferable. To be a true student of any academic discipline is to engage all of these dimensions of it.

Examples of ways of knowing, methods of inquiry, epistemologies, whatever the best term: in literature there is literary theory and its approach to discerning text; history has historiography; science has the empirical test; in anthropology and sociology there is ethnography; economics has computer

simulations; mathematics involves intellectual play and intuition alongside rigorous analysis and reason; art includes sensitivity to the subtle and most profound and beautiful of human creation; dance involves attunement to the wisdom and impulses of the body. The point: there isn't just one way to think and know, there are many ways, and the one appropriate at any given time is contingent on what is being explored; and the academic disciplines in their totality reflect a sophisticated, and inclusive, repertoire of investigative strategies.

Examples of modes of expression and communication: In English there is the literary review, and there is fiction writing, and poetry, and drama; these involve different, subtly but crucially diverse, capabilities. There is the documented scientific article. History has the biographical portrait. Psychology has the case study. Anthropology has the field report. And dance has, well, the dance. And all of the fields that tend to communicate in writing recognize that sometimes the best thing to do is say out loud what you've discovered or believe.

What this university could do--and as far as I'm concerned, should do--is, along with offering students the richest, finest, most truly educative content, give them the opportunity and encouragement to learn the ways of knowing and expression inherent in the academic disciplines.

The Work Group's skills section doesn't go in this direction. Instead, it identifies generic thinking and communication skills separate from the academic disciplines with the assumption that they can be integrated into, or layered on to, regular course offerings, or taught in separate skill-centered courses. The Provost's charge to the General Education Work group refers to "critical thinking" and "communication skills" as discrete outcomes. The draft of the general education proposal authored by the Work Group reflects this dichotomization of content and process by containing separate categories for knowledge and skill. The skill category includes a "writing intensive" course. It promises that the university will develop students' skill to "work well with others." The university pledges it will ensure that students "demonstrate an understanding of personal civic responsibility, including the need for engagement, constructive debate, and community service"--is this, in fact, a skill? or is it a predilection? or is it mind

management? A last illustration, there is a list of "social and interpersonal skills" that the university is going to shape among students, with the various academic units left with the task of figuring out how to inject the teaching of these skills into their programs (that anything would have to be sacrificed in the process of teaching students social and interpersonal skills--which evidently we have and they don't--is not considered in the proposal). At no point, in either the Provost's charge or the draft prepared by the Work Group, is a rationale offered to justify any of this, including where this proposal stands regarding student and faculty academic freedom.

The skills list in the Work Group's proposal is simplistic, sketchy, unwieldy, and inelegant. How all of this could possibly fit together and be implemented to any legitimate extent, much less without detriment to the scholarly mission of the university and student and faculty intellectual and personal integrity, is not clear. And if, say, social and interpersonal skills go into the undergraduate curriculum and the total number of credits for completion of the degree remains the same, then, specifically, what comes out, what is the trade off? If rigorous assessment is part of the general education program, the university will be hard pressed to document where all of this was supposed to have gotten done, and demonstrating that, in fact, it did get done to any significant measure.

Last, the skills list in the current proposal is dated. Reading it gave me a strong sense of *déjà vu*. Decades ago, I saw what I recall to be this same list in high schools I was working in at the time, and the same label was applied to the orientation then as now, critical thinking. The only difference I note between what I remember and the list of skills in the current proposal is that the skills in the current proposal are said to be "collegiate level," although there is no explanation of what that means. I remember how *avante garde* the proponents of critical thinking thought it to be, which, it seems, is also the case now. Back then, to many faculty the list of skills, and the critical thinking concept itself, remained airy and preachy and "over there," and they had a course to teach in history or math or biology or whatever it was, and they got about the business of doing that absent the deference to critical thinking its advocates thought they had imposed on them. To the extent it had any effect, the critical thinking thrust undercut the importance of the substance--the content, the "what"-- of learning, and it lowered the

level of intellectual intensity. Since the action was critical thinking, whether students were studying great literature or today's pressing social issue didn't matter as long as they were learning to be a better critical thinkers--in fact, the pressing social issue was better, because it was more likely, so it was assumed, to evoke critical thinking than, say, Jane Austen. Of course, some would like to make this university more of a center for social issue remediation, so that would be good news to them.

It was my impression back then that much of what went on in the name of critical thinking was in fact easy, off-the-top opinionizing and pontificating. Critical thinking was actually faculty and students reiterating the conventional wisdom and offering testimonies that made the case that they were OK people. If the best education involves students rigorously studying truly significant, timelessly important, things (which I believe it does), the critical thinking emphasis inhibited students' opportunity to get the best education in the schools in which I worked. And I predict it will here at this university as well.

My view, skills should not exist as a separate, discrete category in general education. Groups and individuals should not presume to dictate what skills have to mean for every faculty member and every student in the university. They should not tell faculty what they must do with their courses. Affirm that students should learn to think and express themselves in the ways integral to the various academic fields. Let each field identify what that means for their area--they are far more capable of doing that than anyone outside their number. Charge each field with reporting what they have decided and integrating it into their courses that are part of the general education program to the extent they deem justifiable given all that they are hoping to accomplish, and give them assistance in documenting and assessing their success in doing it. And see what comes out of that and go from there.

Administratively, the Work Group's proposed general education program is a centralized, top-down arrangement, with a Gen Ed Oversight Committee (why General Education is not written out fully escapes me) that "will determine whether courses and allocated credits meet the criteria for one of more of Level 1 [early in the undergraduate years] Knowledge and Skills." Contradicting earlier contentions in the web site, it is noted that "[t]o the extent possible

the approved courses will replace distribution requirement of the degree." Academic units "will report the learning experiences by which the G2 requirements [requirements that are integrated into regular courses] are met in their academic majors." The proposal should but doesn't address the issue of whether this arrangement unduly intrudes into the prerogatives of the various colleges, departments, and programs at this university. This Oversight Committee does not resonate with the university I have known for thirty-six years--or better, the first twenty-six of it; it very much rings of what has gone on in the past decade. Never in times past would some group try to micromanage other people's lives as this program does. There is a hierarchical, dictatorial, superior-to-you, you-report-to-me quality to it, complete with matrices and five-year plans, that reminds me more of something that went on in Eastern Europe before the breakup of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin wall than the university I knew for the first half or more of my career in higher education, and I find that both very troubling and very sad.

A couple of questions that come out of all this: If what I've said here is a way of thinking that is prominent in today's university, why is that the case? And, if what is going on isn't good--and of course I for one don't believe it is--what can be done about it?

Why this thought pattern, these ideas?

*Ideology counts.* If you haven't, sometime survey the writings of a group of Marxists collectively known as the Frankfurt School of intellectuals (many of them fled the National Socialists and came to America from the University of Frankfurt in Germany back in the 1930s). Among them are Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. They were prominent from the 1940s to 1960s and have been dead for decades, and their prose is dry as dust, and just about nobody these days has heard of them, but their writings are incredibly important as the underpinnings of the current leftist ideological orthodoxy in American universities popularly known as political correctness. The basic idea is that the Marxist utopia can best be realized not through armed uprisings of the working classes as was once thought but rather through the efforts of the middle



classes whose outlooks and predilections have been shaped in schools, especially universities.

The leadership of the New Left, as it was called, in the 1960s and '70s knew these writers and this perspective well, and many of them and their followers embarked on academic careers and, over time, established a foothold in universities, and then, through control of hiring and promotion processes, professional organizations, and professional publication outlets (where they were the editors that passed on submissions), expanded it. They found natural allies in social movements that viewed the university and its captive audience of students as an arena for furthering their interests and shared their leftist outlook--prominently among them, the black civil rights movement, the modern women's movement, gay organizations, environmentalists, and, more recently, Hispanic activists.

Read some Marcuse—perhaps start with his *An Essay on Liberation*--to get a scholarly justification for university faculty using their courses to propagate a progressive or social justice perspective among their students and for harassing, silencing, and expelling colleagues who try to get in their way. If you Google, use Amazon's search engine, or peruse a library's card catalog, try the term "critical theory," which is what the Frankfurt School's perspective is called.

*Birds of a feather flock together.* If you are left of center ideologically and politically, your people are on the faculty in the university in droves, and your concerns are front and center, and there are all those impressionable young minds sitting in desks that you can show the right way to think and conduct their lives. The university is a really good place to be for people like you. At the same time, people right of center ask me how I manage to survive in the university as it is, and tell me that no way do they want to spend every day of their lives in the propaganda factory the university has become.

In today's email inbox as I write this in my office at the university are notices for two presentations coming up on campus. See how attractive they would be to you given your particular "feather."

The first is an event sponsored by the Center for the Comparative Study of Right-Wing Movements, the African American

Studies Department, the Beatrice Bain Research Group, and the Sociology Department. The topic is "Does Gender Matter in Organized Racism?" The main speaker is Kathleen Blee, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh. Professor Blee notes that "drawing on my studies of women in the 1920s Ku Klux Klan and modern U.S. organized racism, as well as new scholarship on women in right-wing movements across the globe, this talk looks at assumptions that enable and circumscribe how we understand gender on the political right." Professor Blee will be accompanied by Paula Baccetta, associate professor of gender and women's studies at the University of California at Berkeley, who has "published numerous articles and book chapters on gender, sexuality, 'race'-racism, postcoloniality, Hindu nationalism, political conflict, and feminist and queer movements in India, queer of color theories and practices in France, decolonial feminist and queer theorizing (including in the work of Gloria Anzaldua), and postcolonial feminist and queer theorizing."

The second notice announced a talk in honor of Women's History Month by Angela Y. Davis, "Professor Emerita of History and Consciousness and Feminist Studies at the University of California-Santa Cruz." Professor Davis' research interests before her recent retirement included feminism, African American studies, and critical theory (neo-Marxism). During the 1970s, Professor Davis was associated with the Black Panther party and suspected, though not convicted, of the abduction and murder of Judge Harold Haley in Marin County, California. She was twice candidate for Vice President on the Communist Party ticket.

If these two presentations suit your taste, what better place to work could you find than where you could spend a couple of evenings with others of like mind hearing about whether gender matters in organized racism (I think it fair to assume that it does, and that it is the fault of straight white men), and hearing the latest thoughts of Angela Davis (I believe she promoting "democratic socialism" these days)? And if this kind of thing does not suit your taste, you might prefer some other place to work (even though, just speaking for myself, if you are young and have talent and determination and resiliency, the university and its students very much need you).

*Birds of a feather favor birds of that same feather.* If you are looking to get hired at a university faculty and promoted and tenured, being a political conservative, or a fundamentalist Christian, or harboring reservations about modern feminism or diversity as public policy, or believing the university should focus on scholarship and stay away from social transformation, anything like that, is playing the game on the table with a pair of deuces. Why would somebody want to hire you? For one thing, you are simply wrong. Plus, you are an impediment to the work that needs to be done to reshape the society and the individuals that comprise it. Infinitely better to find and keep someone who will contribute to that work. Plus, it is just human nature to want to bring on board someone one would feel comfortable with as a colleague, and you don't fit in that category. And if somehow you slip through the cracks, and you are in, say, the humanities or social sciences, you'll need to publish in establishment journals, and given who is sitting in the editors chairs in those publications, good luck getting into print being as off-base in your thinking as you are. And if you do somehow establish a good academic track record, the approval process for tenure (permanent status) and promotion runs you through administrators and committees that are not on this earth to further the careers of people the likes of you. And even if you somehow get tenured and promoted, spending your days with people who have no time for you can drive you to drink or out the door. (With all of this, and as dire as it sounds, and is, and just speaking for myself, the university and its students really need you to be just dumb enough, or courageous enough, whatever it is, to forge a career as a university academic anyway.)

And then there is my *Maslow theory of human thought and behavior*. Maslow refers to the late psychologist Abraham Maslow, who proposed that people have basic personal needs that compel satisfaction before anything else, even though they may not realize it. These needs are survival, shelter, food, water, clothing; physical and psychological safety, security, employment; love and belonging, friendship, family, sex; and self-esteem and approval and respect from others. In general, people will go along with anything and anybody that has the power to satisfy--or thwart the satisfaction of--these fundamental needs, and they'll do it sincerely, they will believe in what they are doing. If I can control your Maslow rewards

and punishments, call them that, and you don't have a lot of contrary thoughts and possibilities in your head, which in today's university you won't, not only will you do what I want you to do, you'll think the way I want you to think. And as long as you get your basic needs payoffs and stay clear of adverse conditions you'll be very flexible about which way you'll go: If it's Germany in the 1930s, you'll be a dedicated National Socialist. If it's China in the 1960s and '70s you'll be in the Red Guard. If it's America in the '50s you'll be rooting out Communists. And if it is America and Europe in our time, you'll be pursuing an egalitarian, collectivist utopia and parroting diversity nostrums. I've looked at it pretty hard and I've concluded that human beings, in the main, there are exceptions, are remarkably malleable creatures. They will pull the sleds any way their drivers direct if they get pats on the head and regular feedings. Figure out which way people need to think and act to get their Maslow needs met, and you will be able to predict what they are going to think and do with, to me, scary accuracy.

If you don't like what's going on, what can be done to change it, by you or anyone?

Basically, I don't think anything is going to change the circumstance much at all from within. What is going on is too entrenched, too self-perpetuating, provides too many payoffs. It's working for people, why should they change it? People like me are no threat. I'm old, shifty-eyed, jumpy, introverted, tired, anxious, unsupported, and isolated, and I have zero Maslow power, to call it that, I can do nothing for you in that regard. The way to deal with me is to reject, ignore, and marginalize me. I have written about fifteen single-spaced pages on general education and distributed it to top administrators, the Work Group, and the university committee that deals with curriculum. The total response to my efforts: one terse, impersonal "thank you for sharing your views with us" email from the Work Group; zero reference to the substance of anything I wrote, no invitation to talk about anything or to continue contact--"thank you," go away. And that is what I expected. That's the way those in power have concluded it is best to deal with dissent, dissonance, and they are right. Don't dialogue with me and people like me, don't debate with us, and certainly don't give us a forum; simply reject and ignore us and go about

your business. Although then again, if we get too pushy, like try to make our points at a committee meeting rather than sit back and defer to our betters, or organize an event somebody might attend, well, then, something must be done to shut that down and demonstrate to others what will happen to them if they get out of line.

I might be more effective than I am--any impact would be an improvement, I have no impact in my university now--if I were better at linking up with like-minded others. But I've never had that capability, or truth be told, inclination. I walk my path alone in life, always have, and at this stage of life, it's clear I always will. But even with that, I doubt that I would have anything more than negligible impact on anything on what is going on around me. The dominant elements in the university culture are remarkably good at dealing with the enemy. It's somehow never your item on the agenda, your turn to talk, the spotlight is never on you. (But, still, and even as it seems more and more aversive and impossible by the paragraph, you are needed in the university.)

Staying with the anthropological approach I've taken with this writing--the focus on values and ways--it seems to me that history shows that when cultures change it comes from the outside and not from within. Something new intrudes, and the mosaic of assumptions, values, patterns of relationships and behaviors unravels, or alters, or shifts, however best to describe it. New people, new demographics, new clientele, new ideas, new technology--something from the outside shakes things up. Perhaps up the line the political climate will change, or parents and students will change what they expect and demand from the university. Faculty children get free tuition at my university and my daughter may be a student here. As passive and withdrawn as I am, if one of her courses were something out of "The Manchurian Candidate," in the business of producing politically correct zombies, or some faculty member trashed her heritage or her, I might be drawn to do something. Although I'm not sure about that. As far as I know, my people have never done anything about anything. We are "copers extraordinaire." But still, I hold out a slim chance that I might take some action, perhaps even try to recruit other parents having the same problem to join with me in doing it.

I can imagine up the line students, supported by their parents, letting it be known that they are in the university to study, and that

their attitudes toward race and gender and health and the environment and homosexuality and all the rest, and what they do their lives now and in the future, is their business and not the university's, and that they are going to spend their tuition money somewhere else. My experience with schools at all levels is that they are very responsive to their paying clientele. So far, students have passively gone along with the brainwashing they receive in the university, but I can imagine a day when the lions leap off their pedestals and tear their chattering trainers apart.

And what to do between now and then, understanding that day might never come? (I'm willing to entertain seriously the possibility that the war's over, that the other side has won.) Here's where I get existential. I think you and I simply do what we can to live our finite lives on this earth well and be happy no matter what is going on around us. Live day-to-day, moment-to-moment, the best we are able, with as much integrity and quality, which includes love, as our natures and our circumstances allow. Part of that, do the best things we can think of to make the world a better place for our having lived for a time. I'm here in the office on a Saturday afternoon writing this. It's the best thing I can think of to do that I am halfway capable of doing. Do I think this writing will have any impact? No. Do I think anyone will read it? No. And if somehow a few people do read it, it won't impress them, I realize that. I'm simply not impressive to people; that's just the way it is, and that's the way it has always been. But still I wrote all this, and it took a lot of time and it was exhausting work. No one asked me to do it, and no one cared whether I did it. So why did I do it? Because I decided that writing this was the honorable thing for me to do. No more than that and no less than that.